

Barthes, Beckett and the theatre: three dialogues

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Barthes, Beckett and the Theatre: Three Dialogues

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Introduction: Barthes, Beckett and the theatre

Although he had already published novels, aesthetic criticism and poetry, Samuel Beckett was thrust into the global spotlight in the wake of the *succès de scandale* of his first staged play, *En attendant Godot*, which premiered in Paris in 1953. He continued to write for the theatre into the 1980s, including *Rockaby* (1980), *Ohio Impromptu* (1981), *Catastrophe* (1982) and *What Where* (1983). Indeed, Beckett took to directing his own work in order to shape the impact of his plays in performance, paying attention to all aspects of the *mise en scène* including set, lighting and sound as well as the actors' performances. Like Beckett, who, in his youth, often went to the Abbey and Gate theatres in Dublin, Barthes frequented the theatre as a young man, attending the Mathurins and the Atelier, for example, to see productions by influential avant-garde directors Georges Pitoëff and Charles Dullin in the 1920s and 30s. Barthes wrote an undergraduate thesis on incantation in ancient Greek theatre as part of his Classics degree at the Sorbonne (which was interrupted by his tuberculosis).¹ In 1935, shortly after he enrolled at the Sorbonne, he set up the *Groupe de théâtre antique de la Sorbonne* with a fellow student Jacques Veil. They produced ancient Greek plays in which Barthes acted, and, in 1938, he toured to Greece with the troupe. The theatre criticism of Barthes and the dramaturgy of Beckett were therefore both informed by their early exposure to theatre and by their material, embodied experience of the stage. The dialogues below aim to highlight not only resonances between the two writers' approach to theatre at different

moments, but how these in turn relate to the political, cultural and historical contexts of post-war Europe.²

Barthes was ten years younger than Beckett. Their war-time experiences were very different: Barthes was isolated in a sanatorium for most of the war, then worked in Bucharest, Romania, from 1947–9, and in Egypt till 1950 when he returned to Paris; Beckett was involved in the French Resistance both in Paris and in Roussillon, and then, after the Liberation, in the Irish Red Cross Hospital in the ruined Normandy town of St Lô.³ However, both were profoundly critical of the political and cultural climate of post-war France. Beckett's first full-length play, *Eleutheria* (1947), materializes its satire of middle-class respectability through the *mise en scène* itself and the juxtaposition of the cramped, cluttered Krap salon with the almost bare space of their son Victor's bedroom. So the first dialogue I propose will look at *Eleutheria* in relation to a selection of Barthes's essays on bourgeois French theatre.

Barthes's passion for theatre in the years following the end of the war led him to write for, and then become an editor of, the journal *Théâtre populaire*, which was launched in 1953.⁴ This journal was the vehicle for many of Barthes's writings about theatre in the 1950s, including his discovery of Brecht. Barthes had been influenced by socialism at an early age and introduced to Marxist thinking by Georges Fouré, one of his fellow patients at the sanatorium in Switzerland in the mid 1940s. Key words for Barthes at this stage include demystification, denaturalisation, and the rejection of naturalist or illusionist representation, so it is not surprising that, when he discovered Brecht in 1954, he was instantly converted, and Brecht became Barthes's focus for analysing theatre and culture. However, it is Brecht's discussions of *Mother Courage* (1941), and in particular, his discussion of history, historicisation and the role of the spectator that I am going to take as the point of departure

for the second dialogue, which will consider Barthes's Brechtian phase in relation to Beckett's *Endgame*.

After 1960, Barthes no longer directly wrote about theatre productions, or the live practice of theatre. However, as Timothy Scheie notes: 'If Barthes no longer addresses the institution of theatre in France or specific contemporary productions, "theatricality" and the "theatre" re-emerge as privileged terms in his later writings'.⁵ In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Barthes writes of himself: 'At the crossroads of the entire oeuvre, perhaps the Theatre: there is not a single one of his texts, in fact, which fails to deal with a certain theatre' (177). Many scholars have addressed Barthes and the theatre, and I will be drawing in particular on Scheie's work. However, Scheie does not discuss Beckett, and by bringing Beckett into the conversation about Barthes and theatre, and bringing Barthes into the conversation about Beckett and theatre, perhaps we can begin to rethink some of the concepts of theatre and performance that weave in and out of both writers' work through their early to later phases.

Scheie focuses on questions of presence and the live performing body and how that sense of liveness and corporeality troubles much of Barthes's later work: 'Why must the body, *le corps*, his "mot-mana" and privileged figure, be mediated by language and technology or else remain abstract, and only on the rarest occasions be the living and present body of performance practice?'.⁶ However, it is exactly these complications of the interrelationships between language, subjectivity, corporeality, performativity and the visible / sayable regime of representation, that, as I see it, connect Barthes's and Beckett's later work. I'm interested in the plurality and complexity of embodiment in both writers' work, where the binary between the live body and the textual or visual body is breached because, as I have argued elsewhere in relation to Beckett's later dramaturgy, the subject is both embodied and also generates embodiments which may be written, staged, imagined, ghostly or fantasmatic.⁷ So

the third dialogue looks at approaches to theatre and performance across both writers' late work. Nonetheless, I am wary of presenting a linear narrative chronology because there are also many connections and correspondences across these different dialogues.

Dialogue I. Deconstructing post-war French theatre / culture: Barthes's early theatre reviews and Beckett's Eleutheria

In one of Barthes's earliest essays, 'Culture et tragédie' (Culture and Tragedy), which was originally published in an undergraduate journal of the Sorbonne, *Cahiers de l'étudiant*, then republished later in *Le Monde* in 1986, we already see Barthes's attack on bourgeois culture and specifically theatre.⁸ Barthes contrasts tragedy, elevated above the everyday (quite literally, in terms of the actors' raised footwear), with bourgeois drama, which reproduces the everyday details and petty concerns of a 'fausse culture' (*OC I*, 30). That false bourgeois culture which naturalizes and universalizes its own values and features will become the target of Barthes's criticism over the next few years, and the juxtaposition between Greek theatre and contemporary post-war French theatre and culture reverberates through many of his essays in the 1950s.

After the misery of the immediate aftermath of the war, followed by the purges of collaborators, France, along with much of Western Europe, experienced an economic boom, an extension of the middle classes and a phenomenal expansion of consumables. Kristin Ross notes that: 'French people, peasants and intellectuals alike, tended to describe the changes in their lives in terms of abrupt transformations in home and transport: the coming of objects — large-scale consumer durables, cars and refrigerators — into their streets and homes, into their workplaces, and their *emplois du temps*.'⁹ Ross refers to the films of Jacques Tati which 'make palpable a daily life that increasingly appeared to unfold in a space where objects tended to dictate to people their gestures and movements', and argues that economic

prosperity and rapid state-led modernisation led to the ‘growth of a privatized and depoliticised broad middle strata’ (6). This is the society and its legacies that Barthes critiqued, as did many other left-wing writers and intellectuals, including, perhaps most prominently, Sartre, de Beauvoir and Camus. Rick Rylance comments that: ‘Despite Sartre’s prestige, French culture in the 1950s was effectively refurbishing its old structures, and was fundamentally antipathetic to the values of the dissident Left’.¹⁰

Beckett also expressed his dissatisfaction with the direction that post-war France was taking in some of his correspondence. In a letter to Thomas MacGreevy in 1947, he writes that: ‘Things are very bad, with a badness that won’t lead anywhere I fear, perhaps only, after an ineffectual skirmish, to French Yankeeism and then war. Life even for margin people like me is increasingly difficult. Only the low rent makes it possible’.¹¹ With specific reference to the theatre, the search for an alternative to mainstream, commercial theatre and entertainment gathered momentum. There was also a sense that culture and the arts, perhaps especially the performing arts as a live collective event, were an important means of bringing people together after the horrors of the war: the Festivals of Edinburgh and Avignon were both launched in 1947. The theatre director Jean Vilar had founded Avignon and was then put in charge of the revived Théâtre National Populaire (TNP) in Paris in 1951.

Barthes’s January / February 1954 editorial for *Théâtre populaire* raises the question of what a popular theatre should be, and indeed what a popular public should be. This was much debated at the time, but might be simplified as: does popular mean broad-based, or does it mean theatre for the working classes? In his editorial, Barthes tries not to essentialize a theatre community that does not yet exist (*OC I*, 458), but he is very clear about what the new theatre will not be: he calls for a radical purging or ‘vomiting’ of a ‘théâtre de l’argent’, a money-driven, commercial theatre (*OC I*, 459).

Through Barthes's many other essays on the theatre around this time, we can identify further aspects of his critique of the middle-class theatre that are also parodied in *Eleutheria*. Firstly, Barthes is scathing of the suffocating display of luxury objects and materials in the commercial theatre, including props, furniture, and costume. He complains that the stages of the Comédie Française or the Folies-Bergère are like fashion shows, where style trumps substance and where the audience always sees its financial investment in the ticket manifested on stage (*OC I*, 234). Barthes devotes a whole essay to the 'diseases' of theatrical costume in *Essais critiques*, lamenting the purely decorative function of the Folies-Bergère costumes which disguise the vulnerable and historically situated corporeality of the actor's body beneath so much cloth or costume.¹² Secondly, Barthes rejects naturalism or any kind of illusionist representation of a specific time and place which casts what is represented as natural, the ways things are. In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* he states that 'the "natural" is, in short, the ultimate outrage' (85). Barthes also rejects psychology and emotion in acting as just another form of commodified exchange, facilitated through easily digestible psychological stereotypes in return for the price of the ticket. Thirdly, Barthes calls for a different approach to representing space and time in the *mise en scène*. In his essay on Vilar's production of Kleist's *Prince d'Hombourg* at the TNP in March 1953, Barthes sets Vilar's open staging against the closed, internal spaces of the *drame bourgeois*: the domestic sphere of family dramas concealed or revealed behind curtains, and cluttered with furniture, especially the bed, as the focus for voyeuristic adulterous acts. Such action ends with the close of the curtain: this bourgeois theatre doesn't leave the audience with questions, anxieties or responsibilities that might resonate with contemporary concerns. Rather it denies or conceals current social realities (*OC I*, 245), presenting individual or family spaces and narratives, not civic spaces.

In contrast to these attributes of the 'false' bourgeois theatre, Barthes opposes the model of ancient Greek tragedy which portrays the vulnerability of the civic community's existence, and therefore becomes a touchstone for the kind of performance experience that can cut through the excess and material clutter of contemporary bourgeois theatre. Barthes frequently articulates the characteristics he is searching for in an alternative popular political theatre, and I wish to focus on one or two particular elements in relation to Beckett's *Eleutheria*. Firstly, Barthes's ideal theatre will reject all the elements that he has already criticised such as naturalism, elaborate costumes and set, and an acting style based on emotional identification with the character. Brecht will become the exemplar of this for Barthes, but, in the early 1950s, Barthes also praises several of Vilar's productions at the TNP. For example, in '*Le Prince de Hombourg* au TNP', where he also cites Vilar's staging of Molière's *L'Avare*, Barthes emphasizes that the 'plastique' or multi-dimensional impact of a performance on an audience is even more important than the text, as the immediacy and sensory appeal of the *mise en scène* can render specific historic acts immediate and tangible through every detail of the scenography and actors' performances, rather than focusing on surface texture as luxury commodity (OC I, 250). Theatre is a system of signs but it is also a material, embodied art, as Barthes well knew.

What Barthes applauds in Vilar's TNP productions is his return to the the open stage of ancient Greek theatre from which unpredictable and catastrophic news and visitors arrive. Barthes argues that Vilar has swept away the domestic spaces and clutter of bourgeois theatre to create a civic space where the great issues of the day can be debated. Only an uncluttered space can figure both space and time in a more open way, beyond the limits of the stage world. In non-bourgeois theatres, the stage space itself becomes a 'transfigured' or 'creative space' (OC I, 252).

Looking at numerous Barthes essays and theatre reviews of 1953-4, he also keeps returning to ideas of time and temporality. In an essay on Roger Planchon's productions of *Le Professeur Taranne* by Arthur Adamov and *La Cruche cassée* by Kleist at the Comédie de Lyon in *France-Observateur* (13 May 1954), Barthes praises Planchon's use of rhythm and focus on time and duration which, he says, provokes a kind of anxiety in the spectator, and begins to undermine the apparent solidity of objects and bodies in the present (OC I, 490). What interests me most here is the sense that the stage is an environment where space and time can be modified and have an impact on the spectator's experience of reality and its boundaries, a modification with significant political implications. The experience of live theatre impacts on our senses and our sense-making, it constructs the very frames of our perception, what we see and what we don't. In his discussion of open versus closed stages in 'Le Prince de Hombourg au TNP', Barthes also praises Charles Dullin's interrogatory use of space. For example, in a production of Pirandello's *Chacun sa vérité* (*Right You Are If You Think So*) at the Théâtre de l'Atelier in Paris, Dullin created a bridge above the stage which, according to Barthes, created an alternative experience of space and time, commenting on the petty concerns of those going about their business below within the everyday constraints of the dramatic world (OC I, 247).

These Barthesian concepts of theatre offer an illuminating perspective when placed in dialogue with Beckett's *Eleutheria*, and especially with its scenography. *Eleutheria* was written during a period of intense seclusion and 'a frenzy of writing' (Knowlson, 355) in the late 1940s following his return to Paris after the war.¹³ Jackie Blackman has traced the many references in *Eleutheria* to imagery of the recent war, and especially the Holocaust, such as the barbed wire, flaming towers and ashes.¹⁴ My argument here is that these references intensify the satire in *Eleutheria* precisely of a bourgeois domestic culture refurbishing itself, closing the curtains around itself after the horrors of the war. The detailed textual description

of the set of *Eleutheria* demonstrates a Barthesian satire of specific elements of bourgeois culture and theatre, and the determination to communicate through the plasticity of theatre as well as through the text. According to the opening stage directions:

The first two Acts of this play consist of a split set, with two very different décors juxtaposed. (...). [These] are supposed to be in two different places, although here juxtaposed without a dividing wall. The one is Victor's room, the other a corner of the small salon in his parent's flat. (...) Victor's room takes up three quarters of the stage (...). [I]n Victor's room there is nothing but a folding bed; in the Krap's salon, a very elegant round table, four period chairs, an armchair, a floor lamp and a wall lamp.¹⁵

By cramping the over-furnished Krap salon into a corner of the stage, Beckett foregrounds the suffocating bourgeois materiality of furniture and objects. Barthes would no doubt concur with the narrator of Beckett's novella *First Love* on seeing his paramour's room: 'Such density of furniture defeats imagination'.¹⁶ Victor's folding bed is the only piece of furniture in his room, but it signifies in a very different way to the bed which Barthes saw as the epitome of the tales of adultery in the *drame bourgeois*. It emphasizes Victor's retreat from the external world, and the very vulnerability of the body that troubles the intelligible, signifying systems of theatre according to both writers.

In fact, Beckett exorcizes the material clutter of the salon. An additional innovation of *Eleutheria* is that the Krap salon and Victor's room on opposite sides of the stage switch places between the first and second act. However, the third act takes place only in Victor's room which takes up all of the stage as, according to the stage directions, '*the Krap side has fallen into the orchestra pit during the change of scene*' (6). The stage of *Eleutheria* is certainly decluttered at least by the third act, but it is very much an enclosed, hermetic space, not an open one. Or rather, the play juxtaposes two closed spaces: the bourgeois salon and Victor's empty room. Victor's freedom, the *Eleutheria* of the title, such as it is, is purely

negative: it lies in his resistance to the constant attempts of his family and associates to get him to conform, to be one of them, and to his attempts at ‘being the least possible’ (149). Yet I would argue that the scenography of *Eleutheria* sets up a ‘creative space’ (to use Barthes’s term) where the instability of space and time through the fabric of allusions and the shifting of perspectives literally creates an interrogatory space which is not sure what it does or can value or believe in, but certainly frames and parodies what it rejects or vomits: this is not the utopian space of civic debate and responsibility that Barthes craves, but a negative space which comments precisely on the blindness of contemporary post-war bourgeois culture in France and Ireland to the recent devastation of the war and the Holocaust and their legacies, and to anything outside the parameters of their middle class norms.

Barthes rarely refers to Beckett, and when he does, it is almost always in the context of his being an avant-garde dramatist, which, as Hill and Ionescu argue in this issue, Barthes critiques for being ultimately complicit with bourgeois values.¹⁷ However, Barthes celebrates *Godot* in his essay, “‘Godot’ adulte”, published in *France-Observateur* on 10th June 1954, for its emergence from an avant-garde cult play into a genuinely popular piece of theatre that is also ‘dure’ (difficult). Barthes admires Beckett’s focus on the immediacy and materiality of what is said and seen, avoiding allegory (*OC* I, 499). What Barthes was really looking for at this time was a popular political theatre that could address a range of publics and reflect critically on contemporary society — a theatrical equivalent of his own demystificatory praxis. Barthes found this in Brecht.

Brecht remained a touchstone for Barthes throughout his work. In the dialogue below, I want to focus on his essay on the Berliner Ensemble production of *Mother Courage* which he saw in 1954 and which addresses history, historicization, and how the spectator sees, and places that in dialogue with Beckett’s *Endgame*. Even before he encountered Brecht’s theatre in performance, Barthes believed that, through contemporary productions of classical texts,

theatre can set up a live dialogue with history which engages the memory, perception and even body of the spectator who can make connections across history in order to forge new understandings of both past and present. So watching Vilar's production and performance of Molière's *Dom Juan*, Barthes reads the play and the character through the perspective of the Marquis de Sade, but his larger point about spectatorship is how theatre can reveal the 'ancestralité' or layers of culture and history which are sedimented in our bodies and shape our responses and interpretations (OC I, 455).

Dialogue II. Staging History in Barthes's reviews of Brecht and Beckett's Endgame

In the early 1950s, Barthes had become good friends with the influential French theatre critic Bernard Dort and they frequently went to the theatre together.¹⁸ During 1954, they saw several Brecht productions by the Berliner Ensemble including *Mother Courage* and the *Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1948). Barthes remembers in a later interview being 'set on fire' by these productions (OC III, 329/OC IV, 868). Here was a theatre that addressed the problems with bourgeois French theatre that he had already identified, and that did not just dramatize a story but, through the theatrical *gestus*, demonstrated the links between the individual act and the socio-political context.¹⁹ As this is a vast topic, I will only focus here on a few elements that resonate with Beckett's *Endgame*, which premiered in 1957. Barthes notes the materiality of Brecht's theatre: this is a different materiality to the bourgeois commodification and excess of stage décor and props. These costumes have the texture of real, used material. Barthes argues that Brecht's theatre is not an ideology but has a demystificatory, interrogatory effect through the interchange between the act of theatre and the spectator.

Brecht's theatre responded to Barthes's interest in how we might look at specific historical events in order to reflect on and better understand our own situation. This is not a

fetishisation of history in terms of period exoticism, but an intelligent presentation of history which reveals the tensions and conflicts of a specific, historical moment, so that alternative choices can be conceived and enacted. So, even though *Mother Courage* is set during the Hundred Years' War, the audience is encouraged to actively interpret this historical situation through both subsequent historical contexts and their lived experience of their own contemporary moment. In '*Mère Courage aveugle*' (Blind Mother Courage), Barthes argues that the play in performance activates and engages the conscience of the spectator through seeing what Mother Courage doesn't see (*OC* II, 311): which is that she is not just dependent on the war for survival, but that, by living off it, she is sustaining it. She sees no other option, believing the war to be an unalterable condition even though it destroys her children. The spectator, Barthes argues, both sympathises with the plight of Mother Courage and her children, and, through Brecht's de-mystifying techniques, sees beyond her acceptance of war as something simply to be endured, to a perception of it as a system caused by particular forces and choices, including trade at the expense of human lives.

Blindness features in both a literal and symbolic sense in Beckett's *Endgame*, where the central character, Hamm, has (apparently) lost his sight. Hamm was once in a position of power and authority, though his sphere of influence has been reduced to a refuge where he dominates his carer Clov and his parents Nagg and Nell who are consigned to dustbins. *Endgame* is a historical palimpsest: quotations from Shakespeare are woven into the shreds and ruins of its textual and visual fabric, as well as many other intertextual references.²⁰ The stage set presents a shelter with tiny windows high up in its walls, apparently isolated in a lifeless wasteland due presumably to some kind of nuclear or other disaster, evoking the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but also other landscapes devastated by war or famine throughout history. Hamm recalls the biblical story of the famine in Egypt which Joseph foretells after the seven years of feasting, and also, as various scholars have demonstrated, the

Irish Famine and the Holocaust.²¹ Beckett's theatre may not be commenting directly on contemporary society or politics, but *Endgame* certainly presents bodies sedimented with layers of both historical and recent catastrophe.

Hamm's literal blindness emphasizes his failure to see or acknowledge his role in causing the devastated world of the play which 'stinks of corpses'.²² Peggy Phelan has noted 'the scandal of ethical blindness underlying the catastrophe of the Holocaust' in the work of many post-World War II artists, and specifically in Beckett's post-war theatre: 'Pozzo in *Godot* and Hamm in *Endgame* dramatise blindness in a theatre of mordant spectacle. We see them not seeing, and in that insight we are made aware of what we cannot and do not see in the scene'.²³ Indeed, the audience's sight is also limited: we can't see beyond the raised windows. Clov alone reports what he sees and we don't know whether to believe him. Though Beckett replaces Barthes's desire for political or historical action with a bleak vision of human agency as the wielding of authority over others and the dominance of those who have privileged access to the tools of language and representation, both writers deconstruct the mechanisms through which individuals and cultures construct their reality and what they exclude, falsify or prefer not to see.

From the 1960s onwards, Barthes writes less directly about theatre, or, at least, about specific theatre productions. He seems to have become less interested in the experience of being a spectator at a live theatre event, perhaps losing faith in the possibility of a theatre that can adequately address contemporary culture and society. However, though analyses of theatre productions are largely absent from Barthes's later writings, these are permeated by references to staging and *mise en scène*. Rather than what is depicted on the stage itself, as Leslie Hill has noted, Barthes invokes 'a contingent, performative speaking self'.²⁴ Tropes of staging or performativity evoke the continual and repeated staging of the self, and a dispersal

of the subject amongst its verbal and visual representations that connects Barthes's later writing to Beckett's short plays or 'dramaticules' across stage and screen.

Dialogue III. Staging the embodied subject and its fictional selves

Which body? We have several.²⁵

Beckett's later drama stages beings at the limits of what can be seen or heard: May in *Footfalls* progressively fades in front of the spectator till she disappears completely in the fourth scene. The woman's face which appears on screen in the teleplay ... *but the clouds*... is frequently invoked by the narrator, but only rarely appears and never speaks: the final words of W.B. Yeats's poem, 'The Tower', at the end of the play are spoken by the male voice. The subject is fractured amongst its visible and verbal representations. Both Barthes and Beckett articulate the experience of an embodied subject which ceaselessly generates writing or speech, but this body is not the same as the written or imaged selves which are figured in the Symbolic Order of language or the Lacanian Imaginary or what Barthes calls the 'Image-repertoire'. This concept of the subject as fractured or 'dispersed'²⁶ is evidently shared by both writers.

Beckett used sound and lighting technologies to stage this dispersal: by separating the voice from the visible body or fragmented body part of most of the characters in his late theatre and having both voice and image emerge against darkness, the subjects of Beckett's late theatre cannot be unified into any stable form of verbal or visual representation. Barthes often used staging metaphors to articulate the artifice of his own autobiographical, textual or visual personae. In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* he slips between the pronouns I and he, and the section 'Waiting' of *A Lover's Discourse* features a 'scenography of waiting',²⁷ including a Prologue and three acts, as the unhappy subject waits for his lover.

Corporeality itself becomes spectral in the later work of both authors. In Beckett's late plays such as *Footfalls*, *Ohio Impromptu* or *Rockaby*, the figures are ghostlike, appearing in an unstable space or time that seems suspended between life and death. Scheie suggests that, in Barthes's final years: 'the body's elusive double that shadows his earlier work takes a spectral shape, neither living nor dead, neither present nor past' (19), and it is the photograph and the cinema that become Barthes's privileged subjects of writing, haunted as they are by what *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* terms the 'irremediable absence of the represented body' (84). In *Footfalls*, Beckett presents the ghostly pacing body of May on stage as a 'semblance. Faint, though by no means invisible, in a certain light' (402).

Nevertheless, both bodies of work articulate a politics of plurality and fragmentation or lack as a resistance to *doxa* or normative identity positions (see Hill in this issue). The figure of 'she' as articulated in the disjointed narrative spewed by the disembodied Mouth in *Not I* has been silent and almost invisible for most of her life, relying on others at a supermarket, for example, to hand back her shopping without a word; the figure in the narrative spoken by an isolated, spotlight head in *That Time* takes refuge in libraries or museums away from the normative judgement of the public 'passers pausing to gape at you'.²⁸ Beckett's later drama creates a provisional, liminal texture or fabric of the visible and the sayable that enables his dispossessed subjects to speak or at least to appear, even fleetingly, in the public sphere of the theatre. In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Barthes considers his own penchant for plurality as a resistance to sexual binaries: 'Who knows if this insistence on the plural is not a way of denying sexual duality (...). Meaning and sex are principles of construction, of constitution; difference is the very movement of dispersion, of friability, a shimmer' (69). The shattering of the subject in Barthes and Beckett's later work does not just produce innovative or experimental aesthetic or intellectual works but contests normative images of

identity and embodiment, and gives a voice to those who are marginalized by such dominant norms of identity and behaviour.

Conclusion: resistance to recuperation

I want to conclude by considering the resistance throughout Beckett's work, and appearing increasingly in Barthes's later work, to what the latter calls recuperation, or what we might term the assimilation or incorporation of their own writing into the dominant regimes of visual or verbal representations. This recurs in many of Barthes's later interviews, and is materialized in Beckett's *Catastrophe* in which a denuded figure familiar from many of Beckett's late plays, turns out to be a spectacle staged by an agent of an authoritarian regime.²⁹ Across these dialogues between Barthes and Beckett, there emerges a very contemporary critique of the power and authority relations and identity structures that create exclusive norms and that dominate meaning and power: access to the symbolic currency and the vested institutional interests which control communication or representation – whether writing, theatre, cinema, tv or the internet – is power. Both writers in their later work use the instability and continual shifting between positions and perspectives inherent in the staging or performative trope or praxis as a mode of vigilance, producing both a parody or perhaps exposure of the normative theatre of representation or its opposite in the spectral or the unsaid / unseen: a less recuperable other scene.

¹ For further biographical details see Tiphaine Samoyault, *Barthes: A Biography*, translated by Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

² The dialogues of this essay therefore refer obliquely to the 1949 'Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit' between Beckett and the art critic and historian Georges Duthuit on

issues of aesthetics, published in Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, edited by Ruby Cohn (London: Calder, 1983), 138–45.

³ See James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 297–355.

⁴ For more detail on *Théâtre populaire* see Andy Stafford, ‘Constructing a Radical Popular Theatre: Roland Barthes, Brecht, and *Théâtre populaire*’, *French Cultural Studies* 7 (1996), 33–48.

⁵ Timothy Scheie, *Performance Degree Zero: Roland Barthes and Theatre* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 63.

⁶ Scheie, *Performance Degree Zero*, 63.

⁷ Anna McMullan, *Performing Embodiment in Samuel Beckett’s Drama* (London: Routledge, 2010).

⁸ Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, edited by Eric Marty, revised edition, 5 vols (Paris: Seuil, 2002), I, 29–32. Where I have cited an essay which has not yet been translated into English, I have either provided my own translation or summarised the French original.

⁹ Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 5.

¹⁰ Rick Rylance, *Roland Barthes* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), xx.

¹¹ *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, edited by George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck, 4 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009–16), II, 65.

¹² See Timothy Scheie, ‘Performing Degree Zero: Barthes, Body Theatre’, *Theatre Journal* 52:2 (2000), 161–81, especially 172.

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- ¹³ Once *En attendant Godot* was produced and achieved global notoriety, Beckett withdrew publication and performing rights to *Eleutheria* (the title refers to the Greek word for freedom). Performing rights to *Eleutheria* remain unavailable.
- ¹⁴ Jackie Blackman, 'Post-war Beckett: Resistance, Commitment or Communist Krap?' in *Beckett and Ethics*, edited by Russel Smith (London: Continuum, 2009), 68–85.
- ¹⁵ Samuel Beckett, *Eleutheria*, translated by Barbara Wright (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 5–6.
- ¹⁶ Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose 1929–89*, edited by S.E. Gontarski (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1995), 39. The novella was written in 1946, preceding the composition of *Eleutheria* (1947). Both were written in French.
- ¹⁷ See for example, the essay 'Le Théâtre français d'avant-garde' from 1961 (*OC I*, 1094–1101).
- ¹⁸ See Jean Pierre Sarrazac and Virginie Magnat, 'The Invention of "Theatricality": Re-reading Bernard Dort and Roland Barthes', *SubStance*, 3:2–3 (2002), 57–72.
- ¹⁹ See Brecht's definition of *gestus* in 'On Gestic Music', in *Brecht on Theatre*, edited and translated by John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 104–5: the social gest is 'the gest that allows conclusions to be drawn about the social circumstances'.
- ²⁰ See Dougald McMillan and Martha Fehsenfeld, *Beckett in the Theatre* (London & New York: Calder and Riverrun, 1988), 29–45.
- ²¹ See for example, Hélène Lecossois, 'You'll be Hungry all the Time: Traces of the Irish Famine in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* and *Not I*' in *Hunger on the Stage*, edited by Elisabeth Angel-Perez and Alexandra Poulain (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 149–60.
- ²² Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 114.
- ²³ Peggy Phelan, 'Lessons in Blindness from Samuel Beckett', *Publications of the Modern*

Languages Association of America 119:5 (2004), 1279–88.

²⁴ Leslie Hill, *Radical Indecision: Barthes, Blanchot, Derrida, and the Future of Criticism* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 123.

²⁵ *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, translated by Richard Howard (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977), 60.

²⁶ *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, 143: ‘I am not contradictory, I am dispersed’.

²⁷ Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, translated by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2002), 37–8.

²⁸ Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 392.

²⁹ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 455–61.